



From Christian Conversion to Children's Crusade: The Left Behind Series for Kids and the Changing Nature of Evangelical Juvenile Fiction

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You ask why I cannot keep my religion to myself? I will tell you, my dear brother. Because I see you are in danger of eternal damnation. (Lewis Tappan, nineteenth-century American abolitionist and evangelical Christian)

Both past and present critics have commonly attributed the rise of modern-day children's literature in the United States to a complex constellation of authors, eras, and events. Greta Little, for instance, has identified the importance of *St. Nicholas Magazine* (1873–1941), given its massive national circulation. Similarly, Ken Donelson and Deidre Johnson have discussed the impact of the Stratemeyer Syndicate, with its popular series novels like *The Hardy Boys* (1927–59) and the *Nancy Drew Mysteries* (1930–56). Finally,

Leonard Marcus has written about the significance of the Little Golden Books, whose titles like *The Poky Little Puppy* (1942) democratized young people's access to reading materials on a scale previously unforeseen in the history of the nation.

While these events were certainly significant, another historically important but less frequently cited phenomenon was also instrumental: the narratives published by the American Sunday School Union (ASSU). The ASSU was founded in Philadelphia in

1824 after nearly half a century of the rapid growth and increasing cultural influence of small, faith-based Sabbath schools. Comprised of five evangelical denominations—Baptist, Congregationalist, Low Church Episcopalian, Methodist, and Presbyterian (Boylan 1)—the organization sought to increase its social efficacy by focusing on larger and shared ecumenical goals rather than discrete and more divisive denominational ones.

One of the first tasks that the newly incorporated ASSU identified was to consolidate its publishing efforts. As Anne M. Boylan and George A. Schneider have written, almost from their emergence in the United States during the late-eighteenth century, Sunday schools had been printing various books, pamphlets, and articles to support their curricula and for distribution during missionary efforts. The newly formed Committee on Publications from the ASSU sought to streamline these items, eliminating ones that overlapped and releasing only the most spiritually uplifting new titles. Indeed, as historians Robert W. Lynn and Elliott Wright have noted, at its first meeting, “the Union’s Committee on Publication admitted to being ‘dictators to the consciences of thousands of immortal beings’” (30). Although the Committee later dropped this phrase from its reports, members continued to see themselves as “responsible arbiters” with regard to the religious development of the young (Lynn and Wright 30). In this way, the publications of

the ASSU had the same objective as that of the Sunday schools themselves: moral suasion and Christian conversion. According to historian Jack L. Seymour, the Sabbath-based instructional sessions quickly became “the nursery of the church.” By 1880, in fact, the “denominational leaders had statistics that showed that 80 percent of all new members came into the church through the Sunday school” (34). It is a safe estimate that nearly all of these individuals had encountered at least one ASSU publication.

From its origins, the American Sunday School Union released materials in a wide range of literary genres and narrative subject matters. Titles possessing the ASSU imprint numbered into the thousands and emerged from the fields of history, biography, travel, poetry, music, and—later—fiction. As David Paul Nord has written, “In 1825, its first full year of operation, the society published 224 separate editions of books, pamphlets, and periodicals, amounting to more than 14 million pages” (81). These publications were as popular and pervasive as the Sunday schools with which they were affiliated. Earl R. Taylor has documented that by 1830—a mere six years after it was founded—“the Committee of Publication published six million copies of its various titles, many of which were for children” (13). Especially during these early days before the widespread proliferation of print materials fueled by the Industrial Revolution and, in many areas, the founding of a public school system and the

creation of free public libraries, books from the ASSU were among the first and sometimes the only narratives that young people encountered. Moreover, many of the novels and stories published by the organization were among the most popular juvenile texts in the nation, selling hundreds of thousands of copies and enjoying multiple reprints (see Gillespie). In this way, the American Sunday School Union was instrumental in the creation, dissemination, and popularization of children's literature in the United States. In many regions and for many readers, juvenile narratives were evangelical ones.

The American Sunday School Union was not the only inter-denominational benevolent society publishing books for children. As John Kuykendall has written, it was accompanied by many other associations, including the American Education Society, the American Bible Society, the American Home Missionary Society and the American Tract Society. Together with the American Sunday School Union, these organizations formed what Kuykendall has called the "Big Five" (14). The ASSU would go on to become one of the most important among them, both during its own time and today. Indeed, as Anne Boylan has asserted, the organization exerted "a wide extended sphere of influence" (15).

In spite of the seminal role that the American Sunday School Union played in the establishment of a distinct body of literature for young readers in the

United States, the organization and its publishing wing did not endure as an important literary, cultural, or religious institution. By the latter half of the twentieth century, changing historical times and changing societal attitudes about the place and purpose of religion in American life had led to the gradual decrease in the societal relevance of the ASSU and, ultimately, the elimination of its publication operations. As Taylor has noted, "The American Sunday-School Union was succeeded in 1974 by the American Missionary Fellowship, which has no publishing program" (14).

This essay revisits the important role that the Christian-themed narratives from the American Sunday School Union played in the emergence of children's literature in the United States by focusing on a contemporary book series that revives and even recoups it: the Left Behind novels for kids, written by prolific Christian author Jerry B. Jenkins and renowned evangelical minister Tim LaHaye. *The Vanishings*, the first book in the Left Behind: The Kids series, was released in 1998. The novel follows the experiences of four young people—sixteen-year-old Judd Thompson, fourteen-year-old Vicki Byrnes, thirteen year-old Lionel Washington, and twelve-year-old Ryan Daley—who are left behind on earth when the end of the world approaches and faithful Christians ascend into heaven. The event, which is discussed in the Book of Revelation and termed Rapture, happens abruptly and

without warning. Sloughing off all of their material accoutrements, millions vanish instantly and, as the novels repeatedly note, disappear “right out of their clothes.”

With Rapture taking place in the opening novel of the series, the subsequent books follow the experiences of the protagonists during the seven-year period known as Tribulation that encompasses the time between the ascension of God’s faithful and the coming of the four horsemen of the Apocalypse. As I have written elsewhere about the series, “Tribulation is a time of great trials, tests and tragedies” (2). Within days after Rapture, a series of calamities begins erupting worldwide. These various disasters include everything from flesh-eating locusts, deadly earthquakes, and violent meteor showers to volcanic eruptions, massive tsunamis, and water turning into blood. At the same time, and equally threateningly, the Antichrist emerges and rises to power. To unsuspecting men and women around the world, he is simply a handsome Romanian named Nicolae Carpathia. A likeable and even captivating figure, his eloquent speaking skills and talent for diplomacy earn him the position of Secretary General of the United Nations. Not surprisingly, immediately after assuming office, Carpathia begins persecuting Christians and systematically eradicating Christianity. It is within this environment that LaHaye and Jenkins’s young adult protagonists strive to preserve their lives, their newfound faith, and their

determination to tell as many others as possible about Jesus and the Bible before Judgment Day (Abate 2).

Akin to the tremendous popularity of evangelical-themed novels from the American Sunday School Union, the *Left Behind: The Kids* books have been astoundingly successful. The novels include enough car chases, kidnappings, mysteries, love stories, daring escapes, and shootouts to hold the attention of even the most distractible reader. In addition, they have been released during a timely historical moment and receptive cultural climate: the apocalyptic anxieties generated first by the turn into the new millennium and then by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Book eleven, *Into the Storm*, for example, was first published in 2000, but its teaser undoubtedly assumed added resonance in the wake of 9/11: “Join the kids as they struggle to make the right choices as the world falls apart around them” (iv). The apocalyptic nature of the novels has made them astoundingly successful: collectively, the forty books of the series have sold more than eleven million copies.

While current socio-political conditions and a page-turning narrative style have certainly influenced the commercial success of the *Left Behind: The Kids* novels, another and far more historical phenomenon informs their literary shape and dictates their aesthetic structure: the many novels and stories produced by the American Sunday School Union. Although more than a hundred years separate the heyday of ASSU



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fiction and the appearance of the Left Behind books for kids, numerous literary, cultural, religious, and historical details connect the two groups of books: their affordable prices, small physical sizes, and short lengths, and their privileging of emotion, emphasis on death, and interest in moral didacticism over literary aestheticism. The similarities between the Left Behind: The Kids series and the Sunday school fiction published by the ASSU demonstrate significant continuities in the projects of US evangelical Christianity over more than a century.

Examining these areas of textual and contextual overlap, the present discussion builds on my previous work about the Left Behind: The Kids series and the American Sunday School Movement (see Abate), but pushes it in a new direction by refracting it through an alternative critical lens and reading it in light of a more specific facet of the cultural phenomenon. In so doing, it provides a more complete picture of the influence that landmark events in the history of evangelical Christianity in the United States have on the current movement. While the Left Behind series is a driving force in the present day, the pages that follow unpack the ways in which it is steeped in the past.

Placing the Left Behind: The Kids novels in dialogue with the narratives released by the American Sunday School Union yields a final and arguably even more important implication. The differences between the current Christian narratives and the historical ones are just as instructive as their similarities, for they demonstrate the changing relationship of evangelical faith in the extant body of books written for young adult readers and, by extension, the US body politic. A joint reading of the two literary phenomena points to changing conceptions of children and childhood in the United States, and the place or purpose of religious-themed narratives for young readers on the eve of the new millennium and in the opening decade of the twenty-first century.

Born Again: The Left Behind Series for Kids and the Resurrection of the ASSU Fiction Formula

Both Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins are longstanding evangelical Christians who are well versed in the history of the faith. Indeed, the “About the Author” page of the Left Behind books characterizes LaHaye as “a noted author, minister, and nationally-recognized speaker on Bible prophecy.” As it goes on to note, LaHaye holds degrees from three separate fundamentalist Christian institutions: Bob Jones University, Western Theological Seminary, and Liberty University. More than simply being an intellectual student of the faith, LaHaye has been an active participant in it. As the “About the Author” section concludes, “For twenty-five years he pastored one of the nation’s outstanding churches in San Diego, which grew to three locations.” Finally, over the past thirty years, as journalist Richard Dreyfuss has written, “he has founded no less than twelve evangelical-based elementary and secondary schools along with a Christian college.”

Jerry B. Jenkins’s life and work are equally steeped in evangelical doctrine, church history, and religious traditions. As Bruce David Forbes has written, Jenkins is a prolific author who has penned more than a hundred Christian-themed works of fiction, advice literature, and biography (15). In the 1990s, his past literary achievements earned him the honour of assisting esteemed evangelical minister Billy Graham

with his autobiography. Jenkins is involved with the conservative Christian Moody Bible Institute, and has been a frequent guest on James Dobson’s radio program *Focus on the Family* (Forbes 15).

Given Jenkins’s and LaHaye’s strong evangelical backgrounds, it seems likely that they were at least broadly aware of, if not intimately acquainted with, Sunday school fiction. From echoing many of the same marketing strategies to emulating a number of narrative tactics, LaHaye and Jenkins’s series contains broad ideological continuities within evangelical thought and specific socio-material elements from influential works in the history of Christian juvenile fiction. The power and prevalence of these areas of overlap reveal that, although the Left Behind: The Kids series may incorporate many elements from the current action, adventure, mystery, young adult, and fantasy genres into their series, their closest literary and historical antecedents are the narratives published by the American Sunday School Union more than 150 years ago. To be sure, Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins are not simply revisiting the tradition of ASSU fiction through their book series; akin to the evangelical tenet of being born again, they resurrect it for a new evangelizing mission aimed at a new generation of young readers.

Perhaps the most basic but arguably the most significant detail about the publishing wing of ASSU is the sheer volume of the books it released, along with the astounding commercial success of the books. As

Stephen Rachman has written, by 1840—less than two decades after the formation of the American Sunday School Union and its publishing division—the Philadelphia-based organization had sold over eight million copies of their various titles (8). Meanwhile, Lynn and Wright have noted that by the eve of the Civil War, books from the Sunday school movement accounted for an astounding three-fifths of all the titles held in American public libraries (31).

A key to the remarkable commercial success of Sunday school fiction was the low cost of the texts, their availability as packaged sets, and their eminently manageable lengths. From the beginning, the American Sunday School Union rarely sold individual copies of their books. Instead, they offered large lots that consisted of dozens of different titles. Usually cast as complete “libraries,” with names like The Juvenile Library or The Child’s Cabinet Library, they ranged in price from the budget-conscious two dollars to the still-affordable ten dollars (Cushman 64). Both the number of books a set contained and the material format in which the books were bound—that is, whether they had embossed covers, hand-coloured illustrations, or gilt edges—varied by price. As Alice Cushman has written, “The popular ‘Sunday School and Family Library’ consisted of one hundred books with muslin backs and marbled paper sides. It sold for \$10. There were other sets varying in size and cost, among them ‘The Juvenile Library.’ A selection of seventy-five

books sold as ‘A Child’s Cabinet Library.’ Of these, fifty volumes were available with morocco backs” (64). Although the books were shipped in rough-hewn crates, they were packaged in attractive and ready-to-hang panelled boxes. In this way, as Taylor has noted, the volumes were connected not only to religion and morality in Jacksonian America, but also to socio-economic status. The arrival of the ASSU books made the abode of the purchaser both more Christian and more aristocratic. Especially during the mid-nineteenth century, the possession of a private library was the mark of the gentry class.

Published in an economically affordable format, fiction from the American Sunday School Union had an equally manageable length. During a time when novels routinely extended to four hundred pages and more—Catharine Maria Sedgwick’s *Hope Leslie* (1827), for example, was more than five hundred pages spread out in two volumes—most ASSU books were much shorter, generally ranging from “72 to 252 pages each” (Taylor 14). The small size of the books—measuring on average merely four inches by six inches (Gillespie 62)—only enhanced their usability; the diminutive volumes could be packed for a trip, carried in a purse or tucked into a pocket. Especially for members of the middle and lower-middle classes, who formed the bulk of the readership for these books, their modest size, price, and page length were not merely less daunting but more democratic. Individuals did not need to

have an advanced level of literacy, large amounts of disposable income, or voluminous free time to own, read, and enjoy these books.

These characteristics are all shared by the Left Behind: The Kids series. Undoubtedly one of the causes for the astounding success of Jenkins and LaHaye's series is the short lengths of the texts. None of the narratives exceed 150 pages and some are only slightly over one hundred pages. Moreover, with each paperback title measuring only four inches by eight inches, the books are as portable as they are a speedy read, a quality that appeals especially to a young male audience. In fact, in a customer review posted on *Barnes and Noble.com*, one sixth-grade boy remarked that he read some of the Left Behind novels in a mere half-hour, a detail that he casts as a positive characteristic ("Best_Seller!").

LaHaye and Jenkins's narratives are also exceedingly affordable. Each title sells for \$5.99 through national chains like Barnes and Noble. Meanwhile, the texts are available for one dollar less at many Christian bookstores, including *Christianbook.com*, the sponsored commercial link from the official Left Behind website. In yet another connection to Sunday school fiction, the Left Behind: The Kids books are available as boxed sets. While it is possible to purchase individual copies of the most recent instalments, the earlier ones are available almost exclusively in this format. Packaged in bundles of six

books and enclosed in laminated cases that are as sturdy as they are attractive, the sets embody a type of "instant" Christian home library. The official website for Left Behind, in fact, even pitches the narratives in this way. After extolling the positive benefits of the books for young readers, the site adds that they now come "compiled in a handy, value priced gift box, great for gift giving and collecting" (*Leftbehind.com*).

In the same way that the packaging and marketing of the Left Behind: The Kids series and American Sunday School Union fiction overlap, so does their literary purpose and social intent: to proselytize about Jesus and thereby convert young people to Christianity in general and evangelical Christianity in particular. While novels and stories produced by the ASSU sought to offer wholesome stories that imparted good morals to young readers, they had another, ulterior motive. As Joanna Gillespie has written, both the fiction and non-fiction works alike "generally centered on the conversion of a child or young adolescent" (62). To be sure, the plotlines of many ASSU novels—including bestsellers like *Learning to Feel* (1845) by Old Humphrey and *My Station and Its Duties* (1840) by Eliza Cheap—chronicle a young person's journey to Christian faith. Beginning their lives in both ignorance and sin, the central characters gradually learn about Jesus and then, often in dramatic scenes in the closing pages of the novels, fully embrace his life and teachings by converting to Christianity.

The existence of this narrative formula and the fact that it was repeated in dozens of different books reveal that the novels actually had a dual audience. As Boylan notes, akin to attendance at Sunday schools themselves, novels from the ASSU were ostensibly written for children who were non-believers as a means to bring them into the Christian flock, but they were also read by the young and faithful who sought more wholesome literary fare than the sensational tales found in the cheap story-papers that would have been available to young people of their class status (16–17, 21).

A similar phenomenon pervades the *Left Behind: The Kids* series. With their focus on characters who do not gain entrance into heaven once the Rapture occurs, the books are purportedly aimed at non-believers. As I have written elsewhere, however, the veracity of this intended demographic is quickly called into question given the speed with which all four adolescents convert to Jesus: Lionel Washington accepts Christ as his saviour within hours after learning about Rapture; Judd Thompson and Vicki Byrne do the same by the end of that day. The youngest character, twelve-year-old Ryan Daley, is the longest holdout, but the time span in which he delays giving his life to Jesus is less than a week. In the chronology formed by the novels, this extends only into the opening chapters of the third book in the series (see Abate 6).

Moreover, from the instant that Ryan and the others

convert, they become enthusiastic, even fanatical, Christians, memorizing passages of scripture, meeting with Pastor Barnes for long discussions about theology, telling others about Jesus and his teachings, and risking their personal freedom and often physical safety fighting for the Young Tribulation Force. From the beginning of the third novel and throughout the remaining thirty-seven others, these elements occupy the central focus of LaHaye and Jenkins's texts. As a result, the *Left Behind: The Kids* series has a strong appeal for adolescent readers who are already believers. Indeed, a survey of customer reviews posted about the series on bookseller websites like *Barnes and Noble.com* reveals that, while some young fans credit the series with helping them believe in Jesus, far more are already practitioners of the faith. A typical comment reads, "I am a Christian and I know a lot about God and my religion and respect it" ("An Amazing"). Although such samplings are admittedly limited and self-selecting, these online posts provide a window onto the actual, rather than merely imagined, readership of the series.

To accomplish the joint goal of converting non-believing children and reinforcing the faith of those who are already practitioners, American Sunday School Union fiction and the *Left Behind* novels for kids use an analogous narrative strategy: reminding young readers about the possibility of imminent death, sometimes presenting the outright passing of one of the



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central child characters. As Boylan has written,

In attempting to stir children's emotions, [Sunday school] writers often relied upon reminders of life's fragility. Stories of youngsters experiencing conversion on their deathbeds, of children being killed while playing hooky from Sunday school, of pious babes who from their sickbeds urged repentance upon their parents, of dead and dying Sunday scholars, were staple fare in these periodicals, as well as in the books that filled the Sunday school libraries. (139)

In a vivid example of this phenomenon, Robert W. Lynn and Elliott Wright note, "A popular title in the Union's first 100-volume library was *A Memorial for Sunday School Boys: Being an Authentic Account of the Conversion, Experience, and Happy Deaths of Twelve Boys*. The companion volume for girls had thirteen stories!" (41). While such messages seem macabre to twenty-first-century readers, they would not have been for those living in Jacksonian and Victorian America. As Boylan has written, "Virtually every Sunday school scholar had lost a parent, sibling, relative, friend, or acquaintance by the time he or she was ten years old. Death was both a fact of life and a very real possibility to each child who read Sunday school literature" (140). As a result, death played both a more common and a more visible role in the lives of Americans during this era. Indeed, unlike today, where most people die sequestered in a private hospital room, Americans during the antebellum era died at home, surrounded by family, friends, and neighbours. Thus, deathbed scenes were household events and important ones at that. As Lynn and Wright have noted, "Death was an occasion for a family educational experience when 'last words' were viewed as usually illuminating and the manner of dying was closely


observed" (43). Fiction from the ASSU reflected this fact, while it capitalized on and even exploited it. As Gillespie has remarked, "Christian dying was the educational core of the tale for fictional witnesses and the actual readers, because such final triumphs could happen to ordinary people like the readers" (62–63).

Although the *Left Behind: The Kids* novels were written and released more than a century later, they draw on similar tactics. LaHaye and Jenkins's four central main characters may have been largely sheltered from death prior to the advent of the Rapture, but they become vividly acquainted with it thereafter. Given the sudden disappearance of millions of people, an array of horrible—and lethal—events occur: planes crash, cars wreck, and fires break out. Within hours after the event, a large portion of the city of Chicago, where the books are set, is ablaze. Meanwhile, the highways are a tangle of twisted metal and the airport is littered with the wreckage of numerous aircraft. As a local television reporter who is covering these events laments, such "grisly scenes" can be found around the world (*Vanishings* 96).


In the days and weeks following the disappearances, even more chaos ensues. With many public leaders, police officers, and firefighters taken, dead or otherwise missing, social order rapidly deteriorates. From lawlessness and looting to murder and social mayhem, "the world," as the narrator notes in the opening pages of the second book, "had

become dangerous overnight" (*Second Chance* 2). In a powerful illustration of the despair and desperation that many experience in the wake of these events, the uncle of one of the four central characters commits suicide. When his thirteen-year-old nephew identifies the body, he is told by the coroner that the bag of effects contains everything that was on his uncle's person at the time of death, except his clothes; these items were not retained because they were soaked with blood (*Second Chance* 139).¹

As the series progresses and the end of the world inches closer, daily living becomes even more perilous, and death more common. In book five, *Nicolae High*, Pastor Barnes informs Judd, Vicki, Lionel, and Ryan that one-quarter of the world population—literally tens of millions of people—will perish amid the disasters, calamities, and plagues that will occur during the first two years of Tribulation (40–41). The central characters may be young, but they are not naive: given the pastor's statistic about the death of one in four people during Tribulation, they realize that at least one of them will probably not survive to see the Second Coming of Christ. A few novels later, in book twelve, Ryan is crushed to death by debris during the massive Earthquake of the Lamb. The teens likewise witness the deaths—often gruesome and violent—of numerous acquaintances and friends. Natalie Bishop, a believer in Christ and a member of the Global Community Morale Monitor, is executed by guillotine when she



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refuses to swear allegiance to the Antichrist; Carl Menninger, whom the group knows through the Global Community, suffers an equally horrific end when a plague of locusts attacks him.

Not surprisingly, given this focus, both ASSU fiction and the Left Behind: The Kids series privilege emotion over intellect as well as moral didacticism over literary aestheticism. As Joanna Gillespie has written, “Not many of the Sunday school writers took the time to craft a story that had complexity and finesse; indeed, they seemed to distrust literary skills” (64). The evangelical message of their books was the most important quality, and everything—from character development and writing style to plot premise and narrative progression—was subordinated to it. George Schneider has written that some ASSU writers did not simply refrain from attempting to write the “next great American novel,” they openly distrusted it, fearing that elements like clever writing, witty dialogue, and imaginative plot twists would distract readers from their Christian message. In the words of Schneider, “The whole emphasis was upon developing an ethical code, *not* an aesthetic code. If the literature of evangelism and of the Sunday school movement lacked aesthetic quality, it was because this was not important to either writer or reader; its aim was moral, ethical” (3). Such qualities caused many readers and critics to accuse the narratives of being poorly written. Jane Tompkins has discussed how *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was likened, disparagingly, to Sunday school fiction when it was first released in 1852; reviewers asserted that, akin to narratives released from the ASSU, Stowe’s novel was not finely wrought literature but rather an amalgam of “broadly conceived melodrama, humor, and pathos” (122–46).

Rather than rationally arguing or logically reasoning with their child readers to get them to convert to Christianity, authors of fiction

from the American Sunday School Union appealed almost exclusively to feelings, reminding readers of the deep love that Jesus held for them and the need to reciprocate his affections. Indeed, as Joanna Gillespie has discussed, one of the most popular early books from the ASSU was a novel by Old Humphrey called *Learning to Feel* (1845). As its title suggests, the book chronicles the process by which a young woman comes to experience love for herself, her fellow humanity, and—most importantly—Jesus Christ. During this process, *Learning to Feel* makes repeated reference to the affection that the young female character holds for her parents alongside the love that her spiritual Father harbours for her. These elements, coupled with fears about the possibility that she may die someday soon, prompt her conversion.

Such frequent outpourings of feeling and direct appeals to the emotions of readers located fiction from the American Sunday School Union firmly within the tradition of American sentimentalism and the genre of sentimental writing. As Suzanne Clark has noted, “The term *sentimental* came into being in eighteenth-century England, together with the sentimental novel, as a term of approval. It was connected to the pathetic appeal—the appeal of emotions, especially pity, as a means of moral distinction and moral persuasion” (20). Although this writing style is devalued today for being emotionally manipulative, ideologically insincere, and emanating from, or at least encouraging, false

or fraudulent feelings, some of the most well-known and commercially successful novels of the nineteenth century—including massive best-sellers like Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide, World* (1850), Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s *The Gates Ajar* (1868)—were sentimental ones. Such details reveal the disjunction, which Jane Tompkins has famously articulated, that can exist between the canonical status of a literary text and the cultural influence that it exerts. As she has argued persuasively, “the enormous popularity of these novels, which has been cause for suspicion bordering on disgust, is a reason for paying close attention to them” (124). Read by untold millions, books like *The Wide, Wide World*, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and *The Gates Ajar* may not have been termed “great works” of literature by the largely male scholarly establishment, but they impacted the attitudes, behaviours, and lives of countless individuals. Moreover, they did so not in spite of their sentimental appeal to emotions but because of it. Elements like weepy separations, joyous reunions, and tearful deathbed scenes were the ones that attracted and appealed to their readership.

In yet another element linking the fiction from the American Sunday School Union to the Left Behind: The Kids series, the same qualities permeate the writing by Jenkins and LaHaye. With each chapter containing a series of page-turning events—from frequent kidnappings, high-speed chases, and mistaken

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identities to earthquakes, meteor showers, and plagues of demonic locusts—the books traffic almost exclusively in emotions, and, more specifically, in scare tactics combined with frequent reminders about Jesus’s unending love. The concluding sentences from the “What Happened Before” section that prefaces book twelve, *Earthquake!*, provides a representative example of the heart-pounding plots: “The Young Trib Force is scattered, scared and in great danger” (x). Unfortunately, the *Left Behind: The Kids* novels employ anything but high-quality writing. From the outset, the texts are filled with clichés, ungrammatical elements, and two-dimensional, even stereotypical, portrayals of young people as sulky, spoiled, and self-absorbed. A passage from the opening pages of the first volume forms a representative example: “Judd copped an attitude. He wore clothes his parents only barely approved of, and he stayed as far away as possible from the ‘good’ kids. What losers!” (8).²

A final area of overlap between fiction from the American Sunday School Union and the *Left Behind: The Kids* novels is also arguably the most lamentable: the elements of anti-Catholicism, racism, and cultural prejudice that permeate the Sabbath school curriculum and, by extension, the narratives that arose from it. As Richard W. Lynn and Elliott and Wright have bemoaned, “the maintenance of racial separation—which equals racism—was by word and deed nurtured by the Sunday school in periods when strides toward racial interaction could have been most beneficial.” They continue, “an anti-Catholic bias was imprinted on many minds by the Sunday training” (xii). Sadly, these elements also appeared in many of the novels and stories published by the ASSU. Titles such as *The Heathen and the Christian* (1846), *The Good Indian Missionary* (1833), and *Tahiti Receiving the Gospel* (1832) belie a belief in a racial, cultural, and religious

hierarchy that located evangelical Christianity and Anglo-European American whiteness at its apex.

Regrettably, the *Left Behind: The Kids* novels do not merely embed these elements: they expand on them. As I have written elsewhere, Judd, Vicki, Lionel, and Ryan quickly use their newfound embrace of Christianity to position themselves in oppositional and even antagonistic ways to the rest of society. A passage from book thirteen, *The Showdown*, makes this division—as well as the value judgments associated with it—explicit. Examining a discussion of the Bible that explains how true Christians will be distinguished from non-believers, “Conrad pointed to a paragraph at the bottom of the page. ‘This caught my eye. It says *the good people* are supposed to have some kind of mark on their forehead’” (73; my emphasis). Not surprisingly, given this attitude, the *Left Behind: The Kids* books depict any religion besides evangelical Christianity in disapproving and even damning ways. Traditions ranging from Unitarianism and new age spirituality to Roman Catholicism and Islam are presented, unequivocally, as “false religions.” Judaism is the focus of the most virulent and persistent attacks. Throughout books like *Darkening Skies* and *Battling the Commander*, Jesus is repeatedly cast as the “the true Messiah of the Jews” (*Darkening Skies* 102), and the sufferings of Israel are framed as punishment for failing to recognize this fact (see Abate 15).

In spite of the numerous areas of overlap between

nineteenth-century American Sunday School fiction and the late-twentieth-century *Left Behind* series for kids, the two phenomena are not identical. LaHaye and Jenkins may be revisiting and reviving the once-powerful phenomenon in evangelical print culture, but they are also powerfully revising it for a new audience living in a new millennium. Whereas American Sunday School Union novels were set almost exclusively against the backdrop of interior spaces of the home—as Joanna Gillespie notes, they operated along the lines of domestic realism (62–64)—the *Left Behind* novels are decidedly about exteriors. LaHaye and Jenkins take readers on a journey both far and wide as they spin their exciting adventures to regions throughout the United States and—with Judd’s frequent trips to Israel—even around the world.

In another and even more stark difference, works released on behalf of the American Sunday School Union largely used more New Testament messages about God’s boundless love, compassionate forgiveness, and sympathetic understanding to draw readers in and keep them connected to Christ (see Gillespie 63–68). By contrast, the *Left Behind: The Kids* books, although they are based on the New Testament book of Revelation, seek to spark conversion by evoking themes of human fear and terror in the face of God’s anger and disappointment that are more conventionally attributed to the Old Testament. A passage from book twelve, in which a massive global

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earthquake kills one-quarter of the population remaining on earth, forms a representative example: “‘The Bible calls this the wrath of the Lamb,’ Judd said. ‘The Lamb is Jesus Christ’” (*Earthquake!* 19). Lest this point be misunderstood, LaHaye and Jenkins make it more explicit a few pages later: “The show featured a cartoon of a cute little lamb. Sappy music played in the background. Suddenly the lamb turned fierce and went on a rampage. The audience had laughed. Judd wondered if the people who had drawn the cartoon were laughing now” (*Earthquake!* 31). To be sure, the Biblically related plagues, scourges, and disasters that befall earth and kill millions in the books are called “judgments.”

Especially when viewed collectively, the points of divergence between the *Left Behind: The Kids* books and the fiction from the ASSU are far from insignificant, for they signal important changes in the evangelical meaning of millennialism and doctrinal uses of the apocalypse. In the novels by Jenkins and LaHaye, these concepts are used as literally as they are dramatically. With the Rapture taking place in the first novel, the series sends the message both to its young adult characters and, by extension, to its readers that they ought to repent now, for the end of the world is fast approaching. The release of the *Left Behind: The Kids* novels on the eve of the twenty-first century and amid an array of apocalyptic fears about the dawn of the new millennium only served to heighten these elements. The books participate in what Melani McAlister has termed “evangelical apocalypticism” or the longstanding “evangelical fascination with end-times theology” (780). Indeed, from the followers of William Miller during the 1840s to the fans of Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth* in the 1970s, American evangelicalism has always had a strong connection to eschatology. As James Berger has written,

such apocalyptic fear assumed added urgency—as well as increased socio-political legitimacy—during the final decades of the twentieth century, beginning with the Reagan era: “Reagan linked the prophecies of the Book of Revelation to the crises of the Cold War and the struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union as a fundamentally cosmic struggle” (137). Twenty years later, during the time when the *Left Behind: The Kids* novels were being written and released, President George W. Bush, himself a born-again Christian, would frame the war on terror in analogous terms, as nothing less than an epic showdown between good and evil (see Toohey).

The fiction from the American Sunday School Union is equally apocalyptic, albeit in a less obvious way. While the books lack dramatic accounts about the end of the world, they nonetheless tap into events that can be seen as catastrophic and chronicle actions that can be characterized as apocalyptic. As John L. Brooke and Sally G. McMillen have written, efforts of benevolent societies like the American Sunday School Union emerged not simply out of evangelical impulses but also “millennial imperatives” (Brooke 15). Through the distribution of various Bible-themed tracts, “the hope was that Americans would strengthen their faith, move toward conversion, and possibly achieve millennial perfection on earth” (McMillen 313).

In addition to millennialism, the ASSU was also concerned with apocalypse—but in a different way

than how we now think of this term. As Stephen D. O’Leary has shown, the English word *apocalypse* comes from *apokolypsus*, “a Greek word meaning revelation or unveiling” (5). While this is commonly applied to teachings about the end of history and the second coming of Christ to the world, it also has a more limited and personal usage. St. John the Divine, in his writings on the apocalypse, equates it not only with the emergence of “a new heaven and new earth,” but also with new ways of acting, believing and living (Croly 218). A popular translation from the 1830s—an era that coincided with the emergence of the American Sunday School Union and its many books—rendered St. John’s vision for the apocalypse in the following words: “A new circle of existence will therefore begin. New faculties, more ardent aspirations, and more majestic purposes of being” (Croly 384). In this way, the apocalypse encompasses what might be characterized as “macro” events like the end of the world and the millennial reign of Christ as well as “micro” ones like changes in personal thought, public behaviour, and societal structure. Reduced to their smallest level, therefore, apocalyptic events include the simple process of individual religious conversion, an act that forms the heart of the evangelical project.

Such possible understandings of the apocalypse make visible important changes in the socio-cultural uses of eschatology, while they simultaneously account for the literary differences between the evangelical



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fiction from the American Sunday School Union and the Left Behind: The Kids series. The shift from private domestic interiors to public global exteriors and the privileging of Old Testament themes about God’s fury, wrath, and anger over New Testament ones concerning his love, acceptance, and understanding arise, at least in part, from the shift in seeing apocalyptic events as those that can occur discreetly, tranquilly, and inwardly to ones whose only possible expression is outward, immediate, and all-encompassing.

“Onward, Christian Soldiers”: Changes in American Childhood and the Evangelizing Mission of Christian Juvenile Fiction

The numerous areas of overlap between the Left Behind novels for kids and fiction from the American Sunday School Union go far beyond merely illuminating a series of interesting literary links or suggestive narrative connections; they point to larger questions concerning the religious climate in which these texts were written and released, and their overall social aim and cultural intent. Indeed, reading the Left Behind: The Kids novels in dialogue with fiction from the American Sunday School Union sheds light on the shifting nature of evangelical thought in the United States and changing conceptions of children and childhood.

The novels and stories released by the American Sunday School Union were products of a powerful and pervasive evangelical Christian revival in the United States. As Joanna Gillespie has written, the 1830s and 1840s, when the Sabbath-based schools and the fiction that emerged from them were proliferating at a rapid rate, was a time of great “evangelical excitement in America” (63). Forming part of the Protestant Second Great Awakening, this era was marked by tremendous growth and interest in evangelical

thought and practice. With the founding of numerous new churches, the conversion of thousands of individuals, the launching of missionary efforts at home and abroad, and the massive increase in church membership, it was a period when evangelical Christianity was experiencing a social, cultural, and even political heyday in the United States. Indeed, as historians like Thomas S. Kidd and William McLoughlin have asserted, if the First Great Awakening during the colonial era established the evangelical roots of American culture, then the Second Great Awakening of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries instituted it as a far-reaching and even all-encompassing national faith—one practised in the North and the South, by blacks and whites, and among the rich and the poor.

The Left Behind: The Kids novels likewise emerged during a time of tremendous socio-cultural growth for evangelical Christianity in the United States. As scholars such as Amy Johnson Frykholm, Sara Diamond, and Bruce David Forbes have written, beginning in the 1970s and accelerating at a rapid pace during the 1990s, evangelical denominations experienced a surge in interest and participation throughout the country. With the rise of the powerful political lobbying group Christian Coalition, which held sway with national leaders; the appearance of mega-churches whose membership rolls routinely numbered in the tens of thousands; the rapid growth of

the men's group the Promise Keepers, whose gathering in Washington, D.C. on October 4, 1997 attracted an estimated 700,000 participants (see Niebhur); and the debut, on February 5, 2001, of the massive fifteen-acre and \$15 million Holy Land Experience theme park in Orlando, Florida; evangelical Christianity was experiencing a renewed national popularity and cultural power that it hadn't seen in generations. Offering some scientific data for this societal trend, the American Religious Identification Survey compared results from 1990 and 2001 and found that first among "[t]he top three 'gainers' in America's vast religious marketplace" was evangelical Christianity (Kosmin, Mayer, and Keysar 26). Even before the compilation of these statistics, cultural commentators, church pastors, and religious historians of the late 1980s and early 1990s were already speculating that the United States was in the midst of nothing less than a Fifth Great Awakening (see Marty 461–77; Wallis 1–30).

The Left Behind: The Kids books are products of this evangelical fervour, and form part of its visible and vibrant youth movement. Indeed, according to data compiled in 2006 by The Barna Group, the nation's leading evangelical polling and statistical body, a full "one-third of American teens identify themselves as born-again Christians" (qtd. in Radosh 133). The power and prevalence of evangelical Christianity among young people in the United States can be seen in an array of sites and sources. As Lauren Sandler

and Daniel Radosh have written, it is evidenced in everything from the crossover success of Christian rock bands like Creed, Lifehouse, and Jars of Clay to the proliferation of Christian-themed novelty items like Jesus action figures, WWJD (“What Would Jesus Do?”) wristbands, and T-shirts depicting the crucifixion and bearing the accompanying caption, “Body Piercing Saved My Life.” The *Left Behind: The Kids* novels are as much a reflection of this atmosphere as they are a product of it. The books provide an effective solution to the problem that Richard Lynn and Elliott Wright note has dogged all denominations of Christianity at least since the late-nineteenth century: how “[c]an the church ‘hold on’ to teenagers”? (81).

In the same way that antebellum America was a time of radical changes in the religious climate of the nation, so too was it a period of transformation in its socio-cultural realm, especially with regard to societal views about children and childhood. Informed by Enlightenment-era ideas concerning the importance of the individual, the nation was experiencing “changing perceptions of adolescence and childhood” (Boylan 1). These new perceptions formed a cornerstone to the American Sunday School Union and the books released by its Committee on Publications.

As Phillipe Ariès and Peter Hunt, among others, have written, prior to the late-eighteenth century, childhood had not been seen as a distinct period of physical, emotional, psychological, and intellectual

development. Instead, as Judith S. Graham has noted, boys and girls were viewed simply as “miniature adults,” expected to dress, behave, and comport themselves like full-grown men and women (78). Boylan has observed that, in the early years of the nineteenth century, church leaders believed that adults possessed “a better capacity for intellectual knowledge of religious doctrine” (144). Boys and girls were seen as too young, emotional, and immature to fully understand catechism and experience genuine conversion. For this reason, the earliest publishing efforts from the American Sunday School Union were focused on reading materials intended for adults. According to Boylan, “The 1825 catalog listed textbooks first and children’s books last” (71).

Within a decade, however, the influence of the writings of John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau about the inherently innocent, exceedingly pliable, and highly impressionable nature of children precipitated changes in attitude about not only the time of youth, but also the role that it played in human development. In the words of Boylan again, “A new approach to child psychology, combined with the growth of all types of schooling, convinced adults that children had vast untapped potential.” In stark contrast to previous attitudes, young people were no longer “considered capable merely of receiving religious information; they were candidates for evangelization, perhaps even conversion” (Boylan 14–15). In this

way, by the early-nineteenth century, boys and girls became appropriate subjects for doctrinal instruction, both via lessons at Sunday school and through the morals offered in the many Christian-themed novels and stories that the movement published. This shift in audience greatly expanded the socio-literary mission of the American Sunday School Union while it radically changed the religious nature and social composition of the organization. Over time, as boys and girls came to be seen as far more malleable and teachable than grown men and women whose attitudes and behaviours were often entrenched or at least habituated, the ASSU's newfound focus on young people would eclipse their previous focus on adults. "Consequently, Sunday school workers argued that it made more sense to proselytize to children than adults" (Boylan 16).

The Left Behind: The Kids novels have also been written and released during a time of changing ideas about children and childhood in the United States. As Anne Higonnet, Jerry Griswold, and Neil Postman have written, Enlightenment-era views of childhood as a time of carefree innocence began to erode during the latter half of the twentieth century. After centuries of presenting children as blissfully ignorant of adult concerns like sex, drugs, death, violence, and divorce, American print and visual media began to depict them as acutely aware of these issues. Indeed, in films like *Taxi Driver* (1976) and *Foxes* (1980), with their depictions of street-smart and savvy youth, and via the

new young adult genre of the "problem novel," with its focus on formerly taboo subjects like divorce, death, sexuality, drugs, and discrimination, childhood was no longer depicted as a time of angelic purity. Instead, in a process that Neil Postman characterizes as "the disappearance of childhood," the nation seemed to be returning to pre-Enlightenment views that boys and girls were sinful "little adults." Higonnet characterizes the new crop of young people who were coming of age during the 1970s and 1980s as "knowing children" (12), for there was no aspect of life—regardless of how crude, vulgar, or gritty it might be—about which they did not already seem to know. As a consequence of these and other factors, Jerry Griswold has discussed how the nation's current generation of children—and by extension, the literature intended for them—has undergone a process of "adulthoodification."

The Left Behind: The Kids novels address this shift directly. The opening novel of the series, for instance, discusses how Vicki Byrne is growing up too fast. The chapter that introduces her to readers contains the following description: "She was fourteen years old and looked eighteen. Tall and slender, she had fiery red hair and had recently learned how to dress in a way that drew attention, from girls and guys. She liked leather. Low cut black boots, short skirts, flashy tops, lots of jewelry, and a different hairstyle almost everyday [sic]" (*Vanishings* 17). The novels do not simply lament this growing phenomenon among young people—especially

girls—they seek to roll it back. The trailer park where Vicki lives with her family burns down after the disappearances, and she is taken in by Judd. Arriving at the spacious suburban abode with nothing but the clothes on her back, Vicki is given access to the stylish but sensible clothing belonging to Judd's now-Raptured mother. Although initially uncertain about foregoing her former “hotter look, a street look, lots of leather and black” for Judd's mother's classic American sportswear, she is pleasantly surprised by the makeover. “Vicki was startled by her own appearance. She took two steps back and sat on the bed, the hangered [sic] pantsuit still pressed against her.” The new outfit inspires a new approach to life: “When was the last time she had paid attention to her face without a load of makeup and mascara? . . . She had for so long hidden that little girl, trying to make herself appear older. Maybe it had worked, but she didn't want to appear older now.” The novel goes on to link Vicki's more age-appropriate attitude to her new-found evangelical faith: “She wanted to be who she was, a fourteen-year-old girl who had finally come face-to-face with God. Finally she knew who he was and what he was about. She had given herself to him when she looked just like this, and she didn't want to change” (*Second Chance* 83).

The combination of changing perceptions about children and childhood in the United States and the revival of evangelical Christianity during the late-twentieth century points to an important shift in

religious-themed fiction for young readers. In the novels and stories published by the American Sunday School Union, the goal of conversion was focused inward: on the child reader him- or herself. All of the passages had a proselytizing focus, but their aim or intent was to convince the young boy or girl reading the text to accept Jesus and join the flock of true believers. Especially among the working classes, the ASSU did hope that the child's conversion would have a positive impact on the entire family. In these environments,

children could be the means where irreligious parents were led to the church. Indeed, a common theme in Sunday school reports was the story of the wicked parent (usually a father) who, as a result of his child's conversion, “forsook his vicious practices, engaged in a lucrative employment, and soon raised his family from the most abject poverty to a state of ease and respectability.” (Boylan 16)³

Even in such cases, however, the child's circle of influence was limited to his or her nuclear family. Moreover, the parent's conversion generally transpired after watching a son or daughter lead by example, not after having the young boy or girl actively preach, persuade, or proselytize to them.

The *Left Behind: The Kids* novels also have conversion as an important goal, but the focus, aim, or objective of this process is different. In these



In these evangelical-themed narratives, the proselytizing efforts are directed outward . . . encouraging and even instructing the reader about how to convert others.



evangelical-themed narratives, the proselytizing efforts are directed outward, focusing not so much on precipitating the conversion of the young boy or girl reader—many of whom are already Christians—as on encouraging and even instructing the reader about how to convert others. Immediately after becoming true Christians, Judd, Vicki, Lionel, and Ryan begin telling their friends, family members, and teachers about Jesus and the Bible. As mentioned above, the group recites long passages of scripture that they have learned at Sunday school sessions with Pastor Barnes. In addition, they write, publish, and distribute an evangelical Christian newspaper at their public high school. As Vicki, who initially conceived of the idea, ruminates, “We can use lots of prophecy and stuff from Bruce, and we can just leave piles of them around where anyone can get them. . . . If Bruce is right and we can put a few predictions in there that actually come true, kids will want these. Who knows how many kids might become believers!” (*Nicolae High* 114–15). A few novels later, in book eight, the series takes such calls for young people to proselytize one step further. Judd uses an invitation to speak at a high school commencement ceremony not to offer his classmates words of encouragement about their future, but to preach about Jesus and the Bible. His speech occupies an entire chapter and more closely represents a how-to manual for effecting religious conversion than a passage from a fictional story. “There is one way, one truth, one path to life and peace, and that is through Jesus Christ. . . . I beg you to consider him! He died that you might live” (*Death Strike* 66), Judd thunders at the podium like a television preacher. Although the crowd boos and the school administration attempts to cut his microphone, he remains unfazed, asserting plaintively, “I’m not a rebel . . . I’m a truth teller. [. . .] God will hear you if you ask him

to forgive you” (67). Finally, during one well-timed and especially dramatic moment in his speech, Judd unfurls a banner behind him, which bears the text from John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (*Death Strike* 70). By the middle of the series, the evangelizing mission of the four central characters extends far beyond their classmates and community. As Judd first makes trips to Chicago and then regular sojourns to Israel, it extends to the nation and then the world.

In these passages and the many others like them, the *Left Behind: The Kids* novels send a mixed message about the transformations of children and childhood in the United States. On the one hand, and from a secular standpoint, the narratives lament the added personal responsibility, worldly knowledge, and societal burdens that have been thrust upon young people. As the characterization of Vicki Byrne demonstrates, the books decry the ways in which adolescents have been compelled to grow up too fast, gaining knowledge about formerly “adult” subjects like sex, divorce, and violence at ever-earlier ages. On the other hand—and from a more religious perspective—the *Left Behind: The Kids* books contradict this viewpoint by placing the burden of responsibility for creating converts and saving souls firmly in the hands of their adolescent protagonists and, by extension, their young adult readers. The books cast Judd, Vicki, Ryan, and Lionel not only as

“miniature adults,” but also as child soldiers. Indeed, the four young protagonists, who adopt the military-like moniker of the “Young Trib Force,” are saddled with the task of battling the Antichrist himself. At many points in the series, as the group works to trick, undermine, and sabotage Nicolae Carpathia and his evil associates, the fates of not only their own souls but also those of all of humanity rest in their hands.

While the novels and stories released by the American Sunday School Union certainly constituted a massive socio-cultural effort—encompassing millions of copies of thousands of different titles—there is no indication in the books that the ASSU understood their adolescent audience in this way. The task of proselytizing was reserved for the Sunday schools, their teachers, and attendant reading materials, of which the ASSU narratives are one example. The child reader was the object of conversion, not the agent of proselytization.

Given the way in which the *Left Behind* series for kids does more than simply satisfy the evangelizing mission of converting young people, also striving to inspire a youth mission itself, it rolls back the social conception of childhood in the West to an even earlier era. Far from simply embodying pre-Enlightenment notions of children as “little adults,” the series can be seen as reflecting medieval-era views of children as little Christian crusaders. Although historians have called into question the demographic composition of the infamous

Children's Crusade in Europe during the early-thirteenth century, believing that the event may have been comprised of a more diverse array of individuals than simply young people (Dickson 30), the *Left Behind: The Kids* novels work toward the launch of a new and bona fide children's crusade during the final years of the

twentieth century and the opening decade of the new millennium. Whereas the crusade in 1212 contained an estimated 30,000 participants (Devries 212n20), the one envisioned by the authors of the *Left Behind: The Kids* series—with more than eleven million copies in print and counting—would be exponentially larger.

Notes

¹ Lionel later learns that his uncle Andre did not commit suicide after all—he merely staged his death in an attempt to fool LeRoy Banks, a drug dealer to whom he was in debt. Shortly thereafter, however, Andre is murdered by Banks and his posse.

² Dialogue exchanges involving urban youths, individuals from the working class, or members of racial or ethnic minority groups are even more forced. In a passage from book eight, *Death Strike*, two female inmates at the juvenile detention centre where Vicki is being held utter preposterously unrealistic lines like “I said I’d make her pay if she stiffed me again” and “everything’s square, right?” during a dispute over drugs that ends with the member of the Young

Trib Force being stabbed by a “homemade shank” (2). Meanwhile, the gun-toting and drug-dealing friends of Lionel’s Uncle Andre speak almost exclusively in such hard-boiled phrases as “You don’t see me laughing,” “I wouldn’t be messin’ with stuff that’s none of your concern,” and—after being fooled by the Young Trib Force—“Get him!” (*Through the Flames* 92). The fact that Lionel is the only black character and it is his relative who is portrayed as the drug dealing gang member adds an element of racism to the lack of realism of the book.

³ Boylan quotes from “Sketch of a Sabbath School,” *American Sunday-School Magazine* 5 (1828): 325.

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